

Distracted Driving

Phones, Tunes and Take-Out



Using a hands-free phone while driving is no safer than using a hand-held phone

Driving is a complex task at the best of times. A driver speeds up and slows down, steers, turns, changes lanes, scans the road for hazards, checks mirrors, merges, brakes. When in traffic, drivers must process a great deal of information in very little time. They must detect objects in the traffic environment, assess their speed, direction and intention, consider appropriate responses,

judge their own ability to respond and finally respond appropriately and in a timely fashion. At 50 km/h a vehicle travels 14 meters in one second; at the same speed it takes 37 meters to come to a complete stop under normal road conditions. At 50 km/h, if a driver is inattentive for just one second and needs to stop, the vehicle will have travelled a distance of over 50 meters or about eleven vehicle lengths.

Despite the need to stay focused on the road, it is not unusual to see drivers doing many other activities that take away their attention. There are four different types of distraction:

- Visual distraction (e.g. looking at route navigation systems);
- Auditory distraction (e.g. when holding a conversation with a passenger or when using a cell phone);
- Physical distraction (e.g. eating or drinking) and
- Cognitive distraction (e.g. when lost in thought).



These different types of distraction can also occur together. For example, using a cell phone may involve all four forms of distraction:

physical distraction caused by dialling a phone number or pressing buttons to receive a call; *visual* distraction caused by looking at the phone to dial a number or receive a call; *auditory* distraction caused by holding a conversation with a person; and *cognitive* distraction caused by focusing on the topic of conversation rather than paying attention to any hazards or changes in the road environment.

You'll survive a missed phone call; you might not survive a collision!

(Transport Canada)

Although driving distraction is not a new issue, only recently has it generated significant public attention. According to the Traffic Injury Research Foundation's 2002 Road Safety Monitor, 40% of Canadians believe distracted driving is a serious problem. In a 2004 survey by Safer Calgary, 89% of Calgarians expressed concern with drivers using cell phones.

Much of the public attention has focused on the use of cell phones. These small devices are among the fastest growing consumer products in history. Today, Canadians use more than 17 million wireless devices on a daily basis, including wireless phones, pagers, mobile radios and mobile satellite phones. Cell phones can be a valuable tool for traffic safety. They enable the driver to rapidly report collisions, bad driving and other problem situations. However, the value lies in having the phone available in the vehicle, not in having the phone turned on.

Research in this area suggests that drivers engaged in cell phone conversations are four times more likely to crash than other drivers and take risks and have reaction times comparable to driving with a blood alcohol content (BAC) of 0.08, which is above the legal limit in Canada. The distraction caused by cell phones can significantly impair a driver's visual search patterns, reaction times, decision-making processes and ability to maintain speed, throttle control and lane position.

Current research also shows:

- Using a hands-free phone while driving is no safer than using a hand-held phone because of the cognitive and auditory distraction.
- Cell phone use also often leads to tasks that may further distract the driver, for example writing down dates or notes in diaries while driving.
- Talking on a cell phone is more distracting than talking with a passenger.

Ensure drivers and all passengers are properly buckled up before you start your journey.

In 2003, Newfoundland and Labrador banned the use of hand-held cell phones while driving, currently the only place in Canada with such legislation. However, all provinces and territories have a general offence to address 'driving without due care and attention', a common cause of vehicle collisions. In the United States, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates that driver inattention in its various forms contributes to approximately 25 percent of injury and property damage crashes.

According to a study using in-car video cameras, driving distraction is very common. Researchers found that almost all drivers adjusted climate and audio controls and the majority of drivers talked with passengers. Current knowledge suggests that the more complex a system or activity is, and the longer it takes to complete, the more it distracts the driver. Therefore, using complex devices, such as cell phones, impairs driving more than relatively simple tasks such as tuning the radio.

It is also known that young drivers are more likely involved in distraction-related crashes than other drivers. Researchers have suggested that this is because young drivers use cell phones and adjust audio controls more often than other drivers. In addition, studies have shown that the presence of passengers increases the crash risk for younger drivers, believed to result largely from distraction and increased risk-taking. Because of the relative inexperience of the young driver, collisions are often the outcome.



Rank order of in-vehicle distracters from most distracting to least distracting

1. Email/Internet
2. Route navigation (if poorly designed)
3. Using/dialling cell phone
4. Adjusting radio, cassette
5. Adjusting climate controls
6. Eating or drinking
7. Smoking related
8. Talking to passengers

Source: Young K., Regan M., Hammer M., (2003), Driver distraction: a review of the literature, Monash University Accident Research Centre

Graduated licensing legislation addresses this issue in some places by placing special restrictions on young drivers, for example, prohibiting cell phone use while driving and limiting the number of passengers. In Alberta, young drivers are not permitted more passengers than there are seatbelts in the vehicle. However, parents have the opportunity to set rules for their teenage children and strengthen the existing legislation. For example, a no-cell phone rule and a no-passenger rule for at least the first year of unsupervised driving will allow young drivers to practise their driving skills without the distraction of other people.

Resource

The L.E.A.R.N. brochure gives information on safety measures for young drivers that parents need to know.
www.calgaryhealthregion.ca/injuryprevention

Driving is a complex task that requires the driver's full attention. Wise drivers therefore keep their hands on the wheel, their eyes on the road and their attention focused on their driving.

Driving tips to minimize distractions:

- Always keep your eyes on the road and your hands on the wheel.
- Ensure drivers and all passengers are properly buckled up before you start your journey. And remember, pets need to be restrained too.
- Turn the phone off before you start driving. Let callers leave a message. If you have to make or receive a call, look for a safe opportunity to pull over and stop.
- Consume food and beverages when the vehicle is safely stopped.
- Pull over and stop to change clothes, shave, apply make-up, read or for any other activity.
- Review driving directions before you start. Enter destination information into route navigation systems only when the vehicle is not in motion.
- Secure loose objects in the vehicle before you start your journey.
- Emotions can interfere with safe driving. Whether it is joy, grief or anger, if you can't put it aside temporarily, it's best to stay out of the driver's seat.
- Avoid involved conversations with passengers.
- If you are a parent, consider a no-passenger rule for at least the first year of your teen's unsupervised driving.



If you have any comments or feedback please contact us:

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